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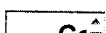
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# HONORING THE 163RD

'Tip of spear' marks beginning of end of Pacific push



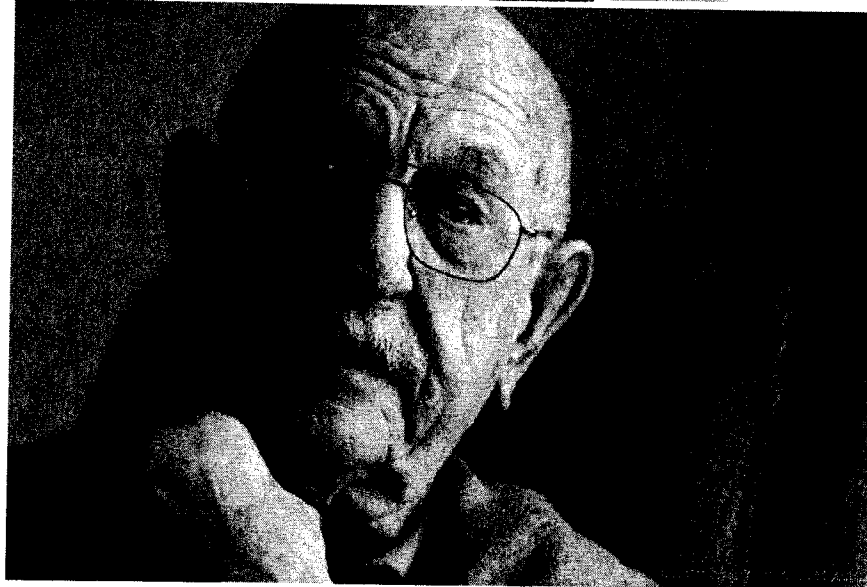
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Leroy "Mike" Michalson enlisted in the 163rd Artillery Regiment of the Montana National Guard in 1940, starting five years of service that included battles in the jungles of the South Pacific.

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March 03, 2013 12:00 am • By SANJAY TALWANI Independent Record

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When Leroy "Mike" Michalson first signed up for Company M of the 163rd Artillery Regiment of the Montana National Guard in 1940, he figured he might spend about a year in the service.

"It paid a dollar a week or something like that," he said recently.

The enlistment took him from Chinook to Helena to Camp Murray (Michalson called it Swamp Murray, near Fort Lewis, Wash.) but one year turned into 18 months and by then, the Japanese and bombed Pearl Harbor and Uncle Sam had some different plans for its young men.

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Before Michalson returned to Chinook in 1945 — discharged for reaching a limit of combat time, he had dodged bombs and malaria in Papuan New Guinea as part of one of the most important, yet less celebrated, campaigns of the war, which stopped the southward push of the Japanese, setting the stage for a massive attack on the Japanese mainland that was averted by the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Montana Legislature considered a joint resolution this session honoring the role of the 163rd in the battles of Sanananda in New Guinea, some 76 days of fighting in early 1943, 70 years ago, the beginning of the end of Japanese dominance of the region and a record for jungle warfare.

The bill, SJ21, would recognize other battles of the 163rd in New Guinea and elsewhere in the Pacific.

It's a similar resolution to one passed in 1993 commemorating the 50th anniversary effort by the 163rd, called "the tip of the spear" of the push. The 163rd, picked by the Army for various high-intensity roles through the years, has its origins in Montana's territorial days and has troops in Afghanistan right now.

The bill missed the deadline for transmittal from the Senate to the House and could be dead, but there are ways to revive such a bill.

Some 1,700 Montanans, including about 200 members of Indian tribes, were with the unit when it was called into active duty on Sept. 16, 1940.

By the time Michalson was in New Guinea, he wasn't in the 163rd. After he left Fort Lewis for a hernia operation, he returned to empty barracks; his unit had abandoned him, he said.

In fact, the 163rd was on its way to San Francisco and then the far Pacific. Michalson was assigned to a unit with a bunch of Oregon men — the 186th — and soon was patrolling the West Coast in a truck mounted with machine guns, the nation not knowing if Japan would attack the American mainland with ships or Kamikaze fighters.

Across the Pacific

Back then, it took a while for the military to move its soldiers around the globe. Michalson and others boarded a ship. Once aboard, they learned where they were heading: Australia.

It was a pleasure vessel, a cruise ship, with bunks everywhere and machine guns on the railings.

"That was our protection," he said of the boat, which traveled with others in a flotilla. "We had no idea where the Japanese boats were at that time, or how many submarines they had. We sure kept it dark at night."

The Japanese at the time controlled much of China and the rest of east Asia.

The unit went to Melbourne, safe in the south of Australia, where Michalson had a good time. The Australian men, he joked, were off in the Middle East fighting alongside the British, and the city gave the Americans a good welcome.

Finally, they headed north to Rockhampton, and then off to New Guinea, a large mountain island covered in jungle along with a few plantations and villages of the natives, known to the soldiers as "fuzzy-wuzzies."

The initial push of the Japanese off key parts of the island had already taken place, but it took about two years to take New Guinea completely. Michalson's unit slept in hammocks with mosquito netting away from an airfield, because the Japanese were periodically bombing the field. The men, knowing the distinct sound of the Japanese aircraft ("It sounded like an old washing machine," Michalson said), would leap into "slit trenches" when they approached.

"We got our first taste that there was somebody else out there trying to get us," he said.

There was disease, heat and rain in a jungle so dense that battle could take place only at short range. In many areas, the ground was so wet that digging trenches was impossible; they'd just fill up with groundwater.

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Michalson characterizes his unit's role as "mopping up" the Japanese presence, but in fact the campaign in New Guinea included at least eight major battles, some with up to 76 days of reasonably steady combat. Michalson was directly involved in a few of the major battles, including Biak — "the dirty one," he said.

In New Guinea, the men ate canned World War I rations of stew, hash, biscuits and more, which the camp cook would mix into a decent meal.

To communicate with home, the men used what was called v-mail, or victory mail, which Michalson jokingly calls email. The men would write letters, which would be collected and then photographed. The rolls of film would be shipped stateside, developed and then delivered as photos. The same process brought mail from the other direction.

Army censors would black out specific information about the exact locations of the soldiers and their missions.

Michalson's jungle duty ended with an onset of what he called "jungle rot," a skin ailment so painful he couldn't wear shoes or cross his legs for a while.

"My Norwegian blood couldn't handle it," he said.

Returning home

The Americans were still preparing for a massive attack on Japan, taking island after island and encircling the empire, eradicating Japanese from caves and jungles.

At one point, the Japanese deployed one of the largest IEDs in history, said Ray Read, director of the Montana Military Museum, essentially blowing up a mountain — on Jolo Island, in the Philippines — by planting a massive network of explosives around its base.

Back then, it took a long time to return home. In many cases, soldiers free to leave the Pacific theater could wait for a vessel or find their own way, said Read. Soldiers hitched rides where they could, some even heading the long way back, westward, returning to the United States on the Atlantic Coast.

Michalson's returned to a military installation in the San Diego area for his exit procedures, returning to Montana five years absent.

He worked for years as an electrician, based in Helena and is an active volunteer at the military museum.

Displays and memorabilia about the 163rd fill a couple of rooms at the military museum, just inside the gates of Fort Harrison, with some of the displays highlighting the war in the South Pacific. More items are behind the scenes at the museum, as well as at the Montana Historical Society, slated for installation.

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**Tags** Donald Knuth, Montana National Guard, 163rd Artillery Regiment, Pearl Harbor, Montana Legislature, Leroy "mike" Michalson

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